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DAYS OF PHUTURE PAST: CAPITALISM, TIME, AND ACCELERATION

DOCUMENTATION, NONMUSIC ACCELERATION, CAPITALISM, SPEED, TIME

Our relation to capitalism is a relation to time. The extraction of surplus-value robs us of time and, as capitalism penetrates deeper into our lives, more of our time is spent generating value or recovering from that generation. Marx (1973, 173) remarks in the Grundrisse that: "Economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself." Class struggle is a struggle over time, to win time from capitalism that reduces time to the production of value. One common characterization of capitalist time is in terms of speed-up, of the sweeping away of "all fixed, fast-frozen relations" (Marx and Engels 2000), that subjects us to constant acceleration. I want to explore our relation to the temporal dimension of capitalism, especially of acceleration, through (and against) the modelling provided by contemporary accelerationism, which suggests more acceleration is necessary.

I coined the term accelerationism as a critical intervention to refer to the belief that the replication and reinforcement of the tendency to acceleration would rupture, eventually, our relation with capitalism (Noys 2010, 5-9). I disputed that this view could actually break with the forms of capitalism, and instead suggested it remains in thrall to capitalism's own fantasmatic self-image of accelerated production. Contemporary accelerationism attempts to answer this criticism by suggesting that acceleration is not consonant with capitalist time and, in fact, ruptures with the temporal forms of capitalism.

The conclusion of contemporary accelerationism is that the future has been cancelled, slowly. More exactly, we have been robbed of our future by an inertial and crisis-ridden neoliberalism that has rescinded the dynamism of capitalism for the opaque mechanisms of speculative finance. What we don't manufacture any more is the future. Instead we dwell in a generalized nostalgia, with even dance music failing the accelerative/inventive test. In reply, the anastrophic temporality of accelerationism is one that goes back to the future. To be more precise, it goes back to select and accelerate the forces that might make the future

again. It is this action of returning that makes accelerationism a nostalgia that poses itself against nostalgia. Against the flattened nostalgia of postmodernism we need, in this story, an active and interventionist accelerationism that can select, develop, and encourage a new dynamism that will break the static horizon of the present.

Mark Fisher uses the final scene of the British 1980s sci-fi series *Sapphire and Steel* to condense this moment. In this scene the two central characters are left in a service station, where there is a temporal bleed-through of past moments. In fact the characters are trapped in a temporal loop and the abrupt cancellation of the series, left forever in a non-place of stasis (Fisher 2013). This moment, Fisher suggests, is our dilemma: trapped in a frenzy of past images that disguises a fundamental stasis. Drawing on the example of popular music, he suggests that "While 20th Century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st Century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion." (Fisher 2013) His suggestion is that contemporary capitalist time is both linear and circular or, to use Freud's distinction between manifest and latent, manifestly linear while latently circular. Beneath the image of an ever available past we exist in a frozen present.

Two forms of time are rejected here, two forms of time which will be familiar to readers of Walter Benjamin. To take circular time first, in 1937 Walter Benjamin encountered a little-known work by the nineteenth-century revolutionary Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881). This was the cosmological phantasmagoria titled *L'Eternité par les astres* (Eternity According to the Stars) (1872), written while Blanqui was in prison for his revolutionary activities (Blanqui 2010). Writing to his sister Blanqui stated: "I take refuge in the stars where one can wander without limits." (in Block de Behar 2009, 62) A work of amateur astronomical speculation, Blanqui argues that the universe is composed of a series of finite elements that, to fill the universe, must be repeated to infinity. As the earth belongs to this series the consequence is that human beings too must undergo this infinite repetition:

What I write at this moment in the dungeons of Fort du Taureau (dans un cachot du Fort du Taureau) I will have written for eternity, on a table, with a pen, in my clothes, in circumstances that are completely alike. And so it is, for each (Ainsi de chacun). (Blanqui 2010, 57)

Blanqui's conclusion is that "there's no progress", only "needless repetitions" (2010, 57). This melancholic vision inflates his own prison experience to one of cosmic imprisonment, in which we are condemned to endless repetition and even the universe is merely "stomping its hoofs in the same place (piaffe sur place)" (2010, 59). Before Nietzsche, Blanqui discovers the "heaviest burden", to use Nietzsche's phrase: the thought of the eternal return.

Including this passage in *The Arcades Project* (Das Passagen-Werk) Benjamin argues that this "cosmic phantasmagoria" does not reflect astronomical reality, but rather the reality of history itself (1999, 15). Contrary to his own revolutionary élan, Blanqui's vision of a universe of infinite repetition translates his own experience of defeat by an irony in which, as Benjamin puts it, "the terrible indictment he pronounces against society takes the form of an unqualified submission to its results." (1999, 25) Resigned to the order of repetition without hope of the revolutionary change he dedicated his life to, the result is a "merciless" statement of capitalist reality as a "vision of Hell" (Benjamin 1999, 25). In particular, Blanqui gives the lie to the prevalent ideology of the nineteenth century: progress, which is now "confined to each particular world, and vanishes with it" (Benjamin 1999, 113) Capitalism only offers the illusion (Scheinhafte) of the new, and "progress" itself is the fundamental sign, or even product, of this dynamic.

The second form of time is the "empty, homogenous time" of linear progress that Benjamin took to task in the essay *On the Concept of History* (1940). Benjamin rejects a linear accelerative model of time that he associates with German Social Democracy and its belief that it is "moving with the current" (Benjamin 2003, 393), as fundamentally inadequate to grasping the necessity of interruption and revolution. The metaphor Benjamin (2003, 402) uses in the notes to the essay of pulling the emergency brake on the train of progress suggests that capitalism speeds within confines that will plunge us into disaster. This could be taken as a critique of accelerationism, and I have taken it as such. What Benjamin suggests is that capitalism inhabits both forms of temporality: at once accelerative and static, linear and circular, producing only "repetitions" and not the new.

This converges with Fisher's diagnosis. But how does accelerationism avoid the replication of linear time? Alex Williams and Nick Smicek (2013), in their "*#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*", attempt to split speed, which operates "only within a strictly defined set of capitalist parameters that themselves never waver," from acceleration, which is reinscribed as an "acceleration which is also navigational, an experimental process of discovery within a universal space of possibility." In this way they try to extract the temporality of accelerationism from both the circular time of commodity-production and from the linear progression of mere speed. This allows them to critique previous forms of accelerationism, notably Nick Land's '90s writings (Land 2013), for not really being accelerationist – as they remain within the tracks of capital. This is an accelerationist critique of

accelerationism. To truly break the circularity of capitalism's perpetual-motion machine a real acceleration is required that can break-out of the confines of speeding-up along the tracks of linear history.

While I have time (ironically, of course) for the critiques of circular and linear time as structural to capitalism, one of the problems is that accelerationism misses the present moment. Reaching into the past to recover moments of retooling and possibility – such as space programmes, 50-60s Soviet Economic experiments with computers, and the Chilean Project Cybersyn – we are left with nostalgia, but a nostalgia of activity rather than (supposed) passivity. These moments are to be freed from their capitalist (or socialist?) fetters and unleashed in the present. Back to the future, precisely.

This reflects a strange temporal place for accelerationism itself. Looking back to the past for moments to be actualized, and forward to the future when this will be done, the notion of what happens now is left hanging. Certainly strategies are suggested by Srnicek and Williams for the present moment: platform hegemony, reworked vertical authority, Left think-tanks, media reform, and reconstituted class power. Not bad aims, some of which I share, but hardly accelerationist; in fact, Gramscian. This is the long march through the institutions without the institutions to march through. While this reflects the evisceration of social-democratic public space and the absence of the left, the intervention itself is left rather weightless.

If Nick Land could simply hymn capitalism, contemporary accelerationists register crisis and circularity, but lack the necessary agency to intervene. They also lack the ability to grasp the forms and mechanisms of contemporary abstraction and mathematization. The assertion is simply we shouldn't be afraid of them, without much sense of why not? The gloss of requiring technical and political knowledge of mechanisms of abstraction and dominance shades into the need for these mechanisms, and a tendency to go vague on their reworking. This results into a concession to the present as the moment of abstraction, without the ability to grasp these "real abstractions". Instead they are mystified as moments of acceleration, while also condemned for their current circularity. The transformation from the circular to the accelerative space of possibility is left mysterious and even mystical.

I'm suggesting that contemporary accelerationism doesn't escape the problems of past accelerationisms, or the past more generally. It remains within the ambit of a metaphysics of forces that require activation and instantiation. The difficulty is that it doesn't really address those "forces," nor does it address who or what will activate them. It remains perched precariously in the present moment, between a valorized past and a receding future. This is disjunction without synthesis. Again, it registers our broken relation to capitalist time, but only in the mystification we can reconnect to a superior force. In fact, our experience of capitalism is one that persists and insists in the form of this broken relation, which does not separate us. We remain in thrall to abstractions that are indifferent to us, but this is no reason to celebrate those real abstractions as real forces. We have not yet escaped the prison-house of capitalist time.

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